

Probing the Heart and Mind of the Viewer: Scientific Studies of Film and Theater Spectators in the Soviet Union, 1917–1936

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A dizzying flight of fancy into the future of the Soviet film industry lights up the pages of Mikhail Levidov's 1927 exercise in "sociological aesthetics," *Man and the Cinema*. In the new phase of film production envisioned by Levidov, each new uplifting Soviet film would be psychometrically tested during debut screenings at Palaces of Culture across the country and the results fed into the production of the next Soviet crowd-pleaser.¹ Levidov's fantasy exemplifies the push for a more precise and "scientific" account of spectator behavior in the years following the October Revolution. No longer left to cultural producers to "sense," "guess" or "intuit," audience response became the target of sociological, medical, physiological and psychological investigation. By the mid-1920s, scientific enquiries into "the viewer question," underway at research cells within state agencies, research institutes, theaters, film studios, and cultural organizations, had begun to produce new forms of knowledge about Soviet cinema, theater, and their audiences.²

Interest in the question of cultural reception in the early Soviet period was by no means limited to the fields of theater and cinema. The fixation

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1. Mikhail Levidov, *Cheloveki i kino: Estetiko-sotsiologicheskii etiid* (Moscow, 1927), 86–90.

2. Viewer research cells were formed within the following institutions: the Society of the Friends of Soviet Cinema (ODSK), the Institute of Experimental Psychology, the Institute of Pedagogical Methodology (IMShR), the Institute for the Methods of Extracurricular Educational Activity (IMVR), the State Academy of the Artistic Sciences (GAKhN), the Communist Academy, the N. K. Krupskaya Academy of Communist Education, the Moscow Polytechnic Museum, *Glavpolitprosvet* (The Chief Committee on Political Education within Narkompros), *Gubpolitprosvet* (the Provincial Department of Political Enlightenment), the Russian Theatrical Society (RTO), the departments of culture at the Moscow and Leningrad City Councils of Trade Unions, the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography (ARK), the State Institute of the History of Art (GIII) in Leningrad, the Meyerhold theater, the Moscow Children's Theater, and the Leningrad Young People's Theater (TLuZ). For a comprehensive overview of the research cells investigating the question of the film and theater viewer in the 1920s, see Iurii U. Fokht-Babushkin, "Izuchenie funktsionirovaniia kino vremen velikogo nemogo," in Iurii U. Fokht-Babushkin, ed., *Publika kino v Rossii: Sotsiologicheskie svidetel'stva 1910–1930-kh godov* (Moscow, 2013), 16–17; and Iurii U. Fokht-Babushkin, "Rossiiskaia publika teatra-sotsiologicheskoe svidetel'stva nachala XX veka," in Iurii U. Fokht-Babushkin, ed., *Publika teatra v Rossii: Sotsiologicheskie svidetel'stva 1890–1930-kh godov* (St. Petersburg, 2011), 13–46.

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on the “sphere of reception” (*vosprinimaiushchaia sreda*) prevailed across a range of cultural platforms including literature, print media, music, and visual culture. “There is nothing more mistaken,” one early Soviet cultural critic mused, “than holding that the reception of a work of art is of secondary importance . . . art is a two-sided enterprise which presupposes a certain interpenetration of the “creative” and the “receptive.””³ Symptomatic of the shift to a materialist and functionalist conception of art, research into the question of reception was framed as an antithesis to the theory of “art for art’s sake.”⁴ It advanced a vision of aesthetic practice built not on the shaky grounds of personal intuition and inspiration, but on “rational,” “objective,” and “scientific” foundations.⁵ Just as their counterparts in the United States, Soviet cultural producers saw the transition from “guess work” to empirical certitude as an important marker of modernity, rationality, and progress.⁶

While still an emerging area of scholarly investigation, Soviet reception research has received growing attention in recent years. The work of Joshua First, Simon Huxtable, and Stephen Lovell has spotlighted the “sociological turn” within late Soviet cinema, print media, and radio.⁷ New scholarship on early Soviet viewer research has supplemented Jeffrey Brooks’s, Matthew Lenoe’s and Evgeny Dobrenko’s pivotal work on the reader reception studies of the 1920s.⁸ The rich variety of early Soviet research on film and theater spectators has begun to be brought to light by new document collections, as well as Ana Olenina’s comparative analysis of the viewer experiments that were conducted by Soviet and American researchers in the 1920s.⁹ Despite

3. A. P. Borodin, “O razlichnykh priemakh izucheniia teatral’ nogo zritel’ia,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 9 (1925): 30.

4. A. B., “O vosprinimaiushchei srede v iskusstve,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 4–5 (1925): 26–8.

5. Nikolai Lebedev, “67 otvetov: K voprosu ob izuchenii zritel’ia,” *Kino-zhurnal ARK*, no. 1 (1925): 21.

6. See Susan Ohmer’s account of the rise of systematic surveys of the film-going public in the US, *George Gallup in Hollywood* (New York, 2006).

7. Joshua First, “From Spectator to ‘Differentiated’ Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism (1965–80),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 317–44; “In Search of the Soviet Reader: The Kosygin Reforms, Sociology, and Changing Concepts of Soviet Society, 1964–1970,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, no. 3 (2013): 623–42; Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford, 2015).

8. Jeffrey Brooks, “Studies of the Reader in the 1920s,” *Russian History*, 9, no. 2/3 (1982): 187–202; Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford, Calif., 1997); Matthew E. Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). See also: Jennifer Brine, “Adult Readers in the Soviet Union” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1985); Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, Ill.: 2003).

9. Ana Olenina, “Psychomotor Aesthetics: Conceptions of Gesture and Affect in Russian and American Modernity, 1910’s–1920’s” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012). For recently published collections of documents on early twentieth-century film and theater audience research in Russia, see the volumes edited by Fokht-Babushkin, *Publika kino v Rossii*, and *Publika teatra v Rossii*. Other recent works on this topic include: Lars Kleberg, “The Nature of the Soviet Audience: Theatrical Ideology and Audience Research in the 1920s,” in Robert Russell and Andrew Barratt, eds., *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism*

these important advances, however, scholarly understanding of the cross-institutional dialogue between the arts and the sciences in the early Soviet period still remains partial.

It has been largely assumed that the science of the viewer that blossomed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s declined rapidly after the cultural revolution of 1928–1931, re-emerging only after Stalin's death. The Stalin era has thereby been framed as a period in which experimental research agendas were steadily crushed by the weight of suspicion.¹⁰ Examining the shift in the theory and practice of research on the theater and film viewer between the 1920s and 1930s, this article seeks to challenge this narrative. As I seek to show, the cultural revolution only spelled the end of one specific strand of investigation. From its beginnings, Soviet film and theater research took two distinct directions. The first branch of enquiry sought to study audience tastes and particularities in order to identify the wants and needs of the Soviet viewer; the second looked to better understand the psycho-physiological effects of theater and film “stimuli” with the view of optimizing their effectiveness and intelligibility. Looking closely at the research conducted at the Higher State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), this article argues that while studies of audience tastes and predispositions were curtailed in the early 1930s, scientific experts continued to be enlisted into the battle to make Soviet cinema more “effective” until the end of 1936. The untold story of how attempts to use science to manage audience response lived on beyond the 1920s allows a better understanding of Stalinist culture's place within the project of twentieth-century modernity. In light of the studies conducted at VGIK, Soviet cinema's eschewal of avant-garde aesthetics for classical forms in the 1930s looks less like the product of a “turn to tradition” than of a modern attempt to optimally manage the viewer's activity.

Research Path 1: The Typology of the Soviet Audience

The first branch of research dedicated to acquiring knowledge about the theater and film viewer concentrated on differentiating the Soviet audience and determining the tastes and modes of perception of distinct audience groups. Early Soviet film and theater professionals increasingly recognized that they knew very little about the demographic makeup of their audience.¹¹ Press

(Basingstoke, 1990), 171–195; Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge, 1992), 26–28; Jonathan Pitches, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting* (London, 2006); Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London, 2007); Vincent Bohlinger, “Engrossing! Exciting! Incomprehensible? Boring! Audience Survey Responses to Eisenstein's *October*,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 5, no. 1 (April 2011): 5–27; M. N. Luk'ianova, “Osnovnye etapy sotsiologicheskoi razrabotki problemy kinoauditorii v Rossii,” in O. B. Bozhkov, ed., *Sotsiologiia vchera, segodnia, zavtra: sotsiologicheskie chteniia pamiati Valerii Borisova Golofasta, V* (St. Petersburg, 2012), 265–84. For examples of Soviet-era works on the topic, see: N. Khrenov, “K probleme sotsiologii i psikhologii kino 20-x godov,” *Voprosy kinoiskusstva*, vyp. 17 (Moscow, 1976), pp. 163–84; Maia Turovskaia, “Pochemu zritel' khodit v kino,” in *Zhanry kino* (Moscow, 1979), pp. 138–55.

10. See, for example, Kleberg, “The Nature of the Soviet Audience,” 189.

11. Viktor Shklovskii, “K voprosu ob izuchenii zritel'ia,” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 50 (1928): 6.

reports published in the 1920s lamented that the people who flooded Soviet theaters night after night remained a “faceless” and “indistinguishable mass.”¹² The gathering of demographic information about the viewer—described as a “mysterious stranger” and a “distant foreign land”—became coded as a *mission civilisatrice*.¹³ The drive to “know the audience” represented the conquest of an unruly and elusive entity by the forces of reason and rationality.¹⁴

Probing into the composition of the theater and film-going public began in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s. Unsurprisingly, class distinctions were of particular interest to Soviet researchers. It was imperative to find out, one article claimed, whether Moscow cinemas provided a space for petit bourgeois ladies to gather after their daily errands or for workers to relax after a long day.¹⁵ Techniques used to lay bare the social makeup of the Soviet audience included monitoring the attendance figures of different social stratas. One study, conducted by the Moscow City Council of Trade Unions’ department of culture in 1928, documented the number of customers that produced their trade union membership cards on offer of a discount in ten Moscow cinemas over the course of three days.¹⁶ The most widespread means used to obtain information about audience demographics in the 1920s, however, was the audience survey—the *anketa*. The Theater Research Workshop established within *Glavpolitprosvet* (The Chief Committee on Political Education), a key driving force in film and theater sociology, distributed surveys across the cinemas, circuses and theaters of Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Tula, and Armavir to determine the age, gender, profession, education level, family circumstances, and party membership of their audiences. Targeting multiple establishments across different cities, and distributing tens of thousands of questionnaires, the Theater Research Workshop’s information gathering constituted one of the most comprehensive efforts to “get to know” the Soviet audience.¹⁷

Surveys of audience demographics were frequently coupled with attempts to categorize the tastes, preferences and viewing practices of cinema and theatergoers. Viewers were asked to identify the genres and actors they favored, the plays and films that they liked the most, and the local theaters and cinemas they frequented.¹⁸ The *anketa* was also used to divulge the popularity of a specific film or theatrical production among different audience groups; surveys used for this purpose required viewers to indicate their assessment of

12. “Smotr kino-zritelii,” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 15 (1929): 1.

13. A. Katsigras, “Izuchenie kino-zritelii,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 4–5 (1925): 59; “Smotr kino-zritelii.”

14. Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London, 1991), 19.

15. “Smotr kino-zritelii,” 1.

16. *Ibid.*

17. “Zritel’ moskovskikh teatrov,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva* no. 27 and 28 (1926): 11–12, 13–14; I. M. “Odnovnik po izucheniiu zritelii,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 7 (1926); RGALI (The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art), f. 645, op. 1, d. 390 (Samootchet zritelii); RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, ll. 50–69 (Svodki anketnogo obsledovaniia); “Nizhegorodskii zritel’,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1928): 75–77; “Zritel’ tul’skogo gostsirka,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 2 (1928): 53–55. The Theater Research Workshop’s research on the film theaters of Tula can be found at RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 358.

18. A. V. Troianovskii and R. I. Egiazarov, *Izuchenie kino-zritelii* (Moscow, 1928), 12–15; RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 14.

the play or film on the whole (expressed via a choice of set answers to indicate approval, dislike or neutrality), as well as to rate its specific components.¹⁹

Indications of audience preference were sourced in other ways—researchers also trialed methods such as counting viewer votes “for” or “against” the production through a show of hands or ballot collections.²⁰ The *anketa*, however, was by far the most widely deployed means of identifying the tastes of the Soviet audience in the 1920s. The *anketa* method’s ostensible effacement of the investigator that oral information-gathering required assured many researchers of its “objectivity.” The opinion survey’s capacity to translate the complexity of viewers’ experiences and preferences into unambiguous numbers and figures was equally appealing to researchers striving for scientific legitimacy.²¹ Designed for distribution among large swathes of the population, the “*massovost*” (mass reach) of the *anketa* was also frequently held up as a badge of empirical accuracy. After a trial run of 2000 copies, the Sociological Sector of the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography (ARK) articulated intentions to print half a million questionnaires for distribution across the entire Soviet Union.²² The push to collect and process large data sets even saw the emergence of the “pencil-less” (*bez karandashnaia*) *anketa*—a single-sheet questionnaire that only required the respondent to tear out a pre-given answer.

The communication of survey findings also played a crucial role in endowing audience research with an air of empirical certitude and exactitude. Audience preferences were typically quantified in percentages and visualized scientifically in tables and charts. The catalogues of audience success ratings drawn up by organizations like the Theater Research Workshop presented an image of measurable and predictable audience behavior.²³ The conviction that viewer demand could be “rationalized” was premised on the vision of a stratified audience composed of distinct types of viewers, whose specific characteristics only needed to be made known.

Audience researchers fervently declared that there was “no such thing as a uniform spectator.”²⁴ They saw the audience as set apart by various bio-social markers of difference, ranging from occupation and place of residence to gender and age.²⁵ Study after study pointed to the stark differences in opinion between audience groups on a whole range of issues: workers preferred Soviet productions while traders favored foreign imports; young people were

19. RGALI, f. 2495, op. 1, d. 11–13 (Ankety).

20. On ARK’s deployment of the voting method, see A. Dubrovskii, “Raboचाia auditoriia o ‘Tiazhelykh godakh,’” *Kinozhurnal ARK*, no. 2 (1926): 28.

21. 1920s surveys on audience preferences typically required respondents to choose from just two, or at most three, predetermined answers.

22. A. Dubrovskii, “Opyty izucheniia zritelii,” *Kinozhurnal ARK*, no. 8 (1925): 6.

23. The “coefficient” was calculated by dividing the difference between the number of positive and negative responses a film or play received by the total quantity of questionnaires returned. See Troianovskii and Egiazarov, *Izucheniia kinozritelii*, 31; RGALI, f. 634, op. 1, d. 312, l. 111.

24. M. Zagorskii, “Eshche ob izuchenii zritelii,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 20 (1925): 5.

25. One 1926 Theater Research Workshop investigation into the Moscow film viewer identified no less than 20 distinct audience categories. See RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 390.

ПЕРВАЯ ВСЕСОЮЗНАЯ КИНО-ОЛИМПИАДА 13

КАРТИНА: Помогает социалистическому строительству Идеологически выдержана Верно отражает жизнь Понятна Занимательна Дает знания, учит Такие картины ставить НАДО	<p>„...На всех искусства самое важное для нас — кино“ (Ленин)</p> <p>ОБЩЕСТВО ДРУЗЕЙ СОВЕТСКОЙ КИНЕМАТОГРАФИИ СЕКЦИЯ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ЗРИТЕЛЯ Ц.С.О.Д.С.К.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Прочти все внимательно! 2. Сведения о себе и мнение о картине дай разорвав соответствующую графу—внизу, справа и слева. 3. Надорванную анкету оставь на стуле или сдай контролю. 4. Особые замечания напиши на обороте. <p style="text-align: center;">Ответь на все вопросы — этим ты поможешь советскому кино.</p>	КАРТИНА: Бесплезна Идеологически невыдержана Неверно отражает жизнь Непонятна Не занимат. Не дает знания не учит Такие картины ставить НЕ НАДО																																	
контр-отметки	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <th style="width: 15%;">Возраст</th> <th colspan="5">Социальн. положение</th> <th colspan="3">Партийн.</th> <th colspan="3">Образован.</th> <th>Пол</th> <th style="width: 5%;">контр-отметки</th> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">до 20 лет</td> <td style="text-align: center;">от 20 до 30</td> <td style="text-align: center;">больше 30</td> <td style="text-align: center;">рабочий</td> <td style="text-align: center;">крестьянин</td> <td style="text-align: center;">служащий</td> <td style="text-align: center;">красноарм.</td> <td style="text-align: center;">учащийся</td> <td style="text-align: center;">другие</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Чл. ВКП (б)</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Чл. ВЛКСМ</td> <td style="text-align: center;">беспарт.</td> <td style="text-align: center;">высшее</td> <td style="text-align: center;">среднее</td> <td style="text-align: center;">нижнее</td> <td style="text-align: center;">мужской</td> <td style="text-align: center;">женский</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Возраст	Социальн. положение					Партийн.			Образован.			Пол	контр-отметки	до 20 лет	от 20 до 30	больше 30	рабочий	крестьянин	служащий	красноарм.	учащийся	другие	Чл. ВКП (б)	Чл. ВЛКСМ	беспарт.	высшее	среднее	нижнее	мужской	женский			
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Figure 1. A “pencil-less” *anketa* deployed by the Society of the Friends of Soviet Cinema. RGALI, f. 941, op. 8, d. 51, l. 13.

attracted to adventure and stunt films while older viewers preferred drama.²⁶ Investigations into the preferences of specific categories of viewers (namely workers, peasants, and young adults) pointed to the variations within these distinct audience groups. A conference devoted to unearthing the specific demands of the worker-cinema viewer, held in July 1929 under the auspices of the Moscow City Council of Trade Unions and Sovkino, highlighted the importance of factors such as family background, age, and type of employment in creating “taste distinctions” among workers. “The demands of a seasonal worker,” announced a conference delegate, “vary considerably from the needs of a qualified metal worker . . . the interests of young [workers] are not the same as those of adults.”²⁷ *Anketa* investigations into the cinema-going habits of schoolchildren similarly found that the regularity with which young viewers frequented the cinema, the motivations driving their visits and the types of films they favored varied according to age, gender, parental occupation, and Young Pioneer or Komsomol membership. “The various subgroups

26. Troianovskii and Egiazarov, *Izucheniia kinozritel'ia*, 16–17, 32–33.

27. B. Levman, *Rabochii zritel' i kino: itogi pervoi rabochei kino-konferentsii* (Moscow, 1930), 15–16.

of every social group,” one audience researcher concluded, are “endowed with distinct aesthetic tastes, habits, and levels of cultural development.”²⁸

Probing into the psychological and physiological particularities of different audience categories corroborated the vision of a stratified viewing public. Anatoli Terskoi’s studies of the peasant viewer practiced capturing audience reactions on photographic film in the aim of illuminating how viewers’ perceptive capacities varied across the diverse regions of the Soviet Union.²⁹ This photographic record of regional variation was to enable film producers to gauge which parts of the country would struggle to digest complex narrative structures and which would be receptive to fast-paced editing. “The type of film required in the distant outskirts of the north is completely different from the one needed in the central commercial districts,” concluded Terskoi. “That which suits an Eskimo or a Zyrian is not likely to please a craftsman from the Tverskoi province,” he warned.³⁰

The psycho-physiological constitution of children and young adults proved particularly fascinating to investigators. The Young People’s Theater in Leningrad (TIuZ) studied viewers’ letters and monitored select audience members during performances in order to “diagnose” its young audience members as “introverts or extroverts,” “moralists or aesthetes,” “cultivated or uncultivated,” and “normal or defective.”³¹ The theater’s investigators also insisted on stark differentiations according to gender: “a predisposition towards the sentimental and the beautiful can be observed in female viewers,” they concluded, “just as a predisposition towards the heroic is notable in boys.”³² Studies of young viewers incorporated the techniques for measuring and categorizing human capabilities deployed in disciplines such as labor psychology (psychotechnics) and the “science of the child” (pedology) in the 1920s.³³ At the pedology department at the Institute of Pedagogical Methodology (IMShR), investigators embarked on a series of psychological tests to determine the different tastes, imaginative capacities, and modes of spectatorship pertaining to children from different social backgrounds and age groups. Based on these experiments, IMShR researchers identified three distinct categories of child viewers—the “passive viewer,” “the active viewer,” and the “excitable viewer.” Each type of spectator, the institute asserted,

28. Zagorskii, “Eshche ob izuchenii zritel’ia,” 5–6.

29. An. Terskoi, “S’emka refleksov litsa kak material dlia izhucheniia derevenskogo zritel’ia,” *Kinozhurnal ARK*, no. 8 (1925): 10–12.

30. *Ibid.*, 10.

31. N. Bakhtin, “Pedagogicheskaiia rabota,” in Adrian I. Piotrovskii, ed., *Teatr iunykh zritelei: Opyt raboty teatra dlia detei i iunoshetva, 1922–1927* (Leningrad, 1927), 119; “Nauchnoe issledovanie spektaklia,” *Novyi zritel’*, no. 12 (1924): 1–2.

32. Bakhtin, “Pedagogicheskaiia rabota,” 116.

33. For an overview of the “testing” practices deployed in these disciplines, see Andy Byford, “The Mental Test as a Boundary Object in Early-20th-Century Russian Child Science,” *History of the Human Sciences* 27, no. 4 (October 2014): 22–58. On the interconnections between Soviet children’s psychology and cinema, see Ana Olenina, “The Junctures of Children’s Psychology and Soviet Film Avant-garde: Representations, Influences, Applications,” in Olga Voronina, ed., *The Brill Companion to Soviet Children’s Literature and Film* (Leiden, forthcoming).

responded to stimuli “in accordance with his/her distinct temperament,” interpreting “what is shown on screen in a unique way.”³⁴

Research Path 2: The Spectator-Text Relationship

The attempt to map a typology of the Soviet viewer was underwritten by the vision of a fragmented audience made up of selective consumers whose tastes, demands, and mental and physical capabilities fluctuated in correlation with socio-demographic variables. This conception of the culture-consumer relationship was challenged by a competing line of enquiry advanced in the 1920s. Rather than studying audience characteristics, this body of research fixed attention on the impact of specific aspects of a film or play on the reception process. Instead of attributing the viewer to a “fixed” group or category, it understood the spectator as a malleable entity, shaped by the characteristics of the cultural text.

The spontaneous effects of cinema and theater were most commonly investigated via the “observational method.” First used to record the dominant mood of the auditorium at the Moscow Children’s Theater and the Leningrad TIuZ, mass observations were later adopted at Meyerhold’s theater and the Theater Research Workshop. Investigators recorded the number of times that a given audience burst into laughter, fell into concentrated silence, or clapped excitedly during the performance.³⁵ With the help of a predevised scale of reactions (typically ranging from raucous applause or concentrated attention to exit from the theater) and a chart dividing the performance into intervals, researchers also sought to correlate audience reactions with specific segments of the play. Quantifying the process of reception, the “cardiographs” produced by these investigations mapped the peaks and troughs of viewer concentration and traced the fluctuation of percentages of laughter, applause or silence over the course of a performance.³⁶

These visualizations appeared to provide concrete, scientific verification of how well a cultural production had succeeded in its aims. Audience observation was thereby seen by many researchers as a means to eliminate subjective errors from the creative process. The study of audience reactions elicited by TIuZ’s production of the comedy *Twins* (*Bliznetsy*, Tarvid and Zon, 1926), for example, reassured its creators that they had succeeded in provoking laughter throughout—the first act was found to compel thirty-five bouts of laughter on average, with forty-seven and forty-two counts recorded in the second and third acts. The conversations and coughing observed during the play’s prologue and dramatization of a political meeting, however, indicated a need for revisions.³⁷ Similarly striving to achieve a “scientific understanding of the theater,” Meyerhold’s laboratory endeavored to establish a set of objectively verified aesthetic “laws.” “Laughter,” its investigators concluded

34. V. A. Pravdoliubov, *Kino i nasha molodezh’: Na osnove dannykh pedologii* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1929), 130–133.

35. V. F. Fedorov, “Opyty izucheniia zritel’nogo zala,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 18 (1925): 14–15.

36. RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, ll. 1, 112, 265; Bakhtin, “Pedagogicheskaia rabota,” 110.

37. “Bliznetsy v TIuZe,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 13 (1926): 11.



Figure 2. The Theatre Research Workshop’s graph of audience reactions to a production of *The Seven Wives of Ivan the Terrible* (1925). RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 1.

with solemnity, “should not occupy less than 70% of overall audience reactions (otherwise the performance will be boring), providing that the overall number of moments of laughter is not less than thirty per hour and that the total number of audience reactions is not less than fifty per hour.”³⁸

The inclusion of recording instruments in the process of observation promised to make this method of information gathering even more “objective.” Alongside the capture of audience members’ bodily expressions on photographic film, widely practiced in the 1920s, institutions like TIUZ recorded the precise duration of audience reactions in minutes and seconds using a chronometer.³⁹

Many research centers also sought to acquire devices for measuring audience blood pressure, respiratory rate, pulse, and motor response. Both the Theater Research Workshop and the State Academy of the Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) drew up detailed plans for film research laboratories and special

38. Fedorov, “Opyty izucheniia zritel’nogo zala,” 15.

39. On attempts to photograph viewers’ faces, see Terskoi, “S’emka refleksov litsa,” and A. Katsigras, “Izuchenie kino-zritelia,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 4–5 (1925): 58–63. The timing of reactions was first trialed at the State Institute of the History of Art. See Bakhtin, “Pedagogicheskaia rabota,” 120. The Leningrad City Council of Trade Unions’ department of culture also practiced this method. See RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 125.



Figure 3. A. Katsigras's photographs of peasants' reactions during a screening. Featured in his article "Izuchenie kino-zritel'ia," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 4–5 (1925): 58–63.

theater loges that would be stocked with a wide array of clinical equipment to scientifically record "stimulations, physiological processes, and reactions."⁴⁰ The use of biomedical examining equipment to study the viewer's internal physiological changes was underway by the end of the 1920s. The "laboratory for the study of mass psychology," founded in 1929 at the Russian Theatrical

40. RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 32–36 (Polozhenie o kino-komitete i kino issledovatel'skom institute); On the Theater Research Workshop's plans for an experimental theater loge, see RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, ll. 113, 226–227. These plans are discussed in detail by Olenina. See her "Psychomotor Aesthetics," 222–23, 280–81.

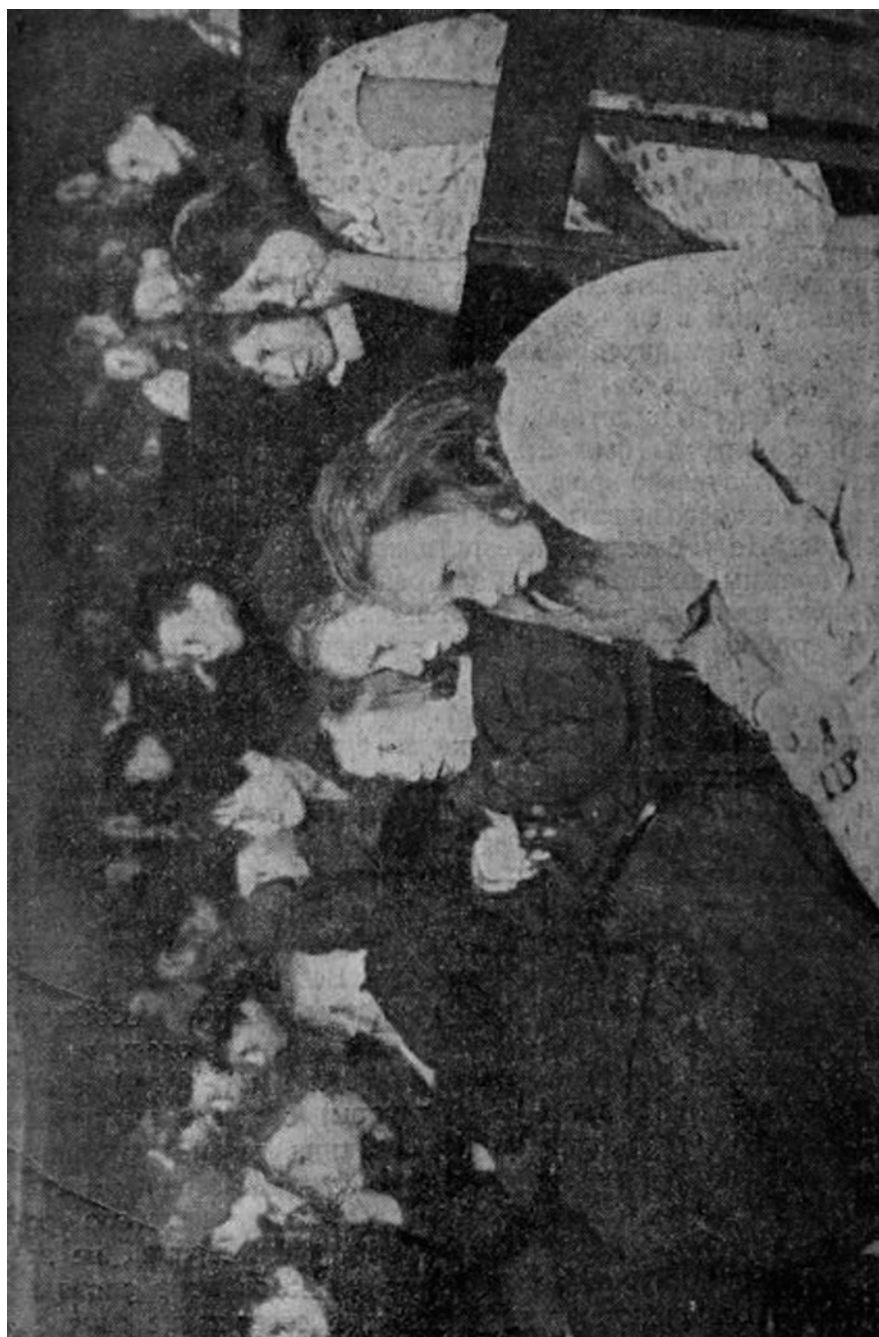


Figure 4. Abram Gel'mont's photographs of child viewers. Featured in his book *Izuchenie detskogo kino-zritel'ia* (Moscow, 1933), 51.

Society (RTO), acquired a galvanometer (used to measure skin conductance) as well as a kymograph and a pneumograph to study levels of affective arousal.⁴¹ At the IMShR's cinema laboratory headed by Abram Gel'mont, the viewer's response to a range of "film stimuli" was tested via a specially designed viewing chair that was hooked up to a kymograph. Changes in respiration rate were monitored by a pneumograph attached to the child's chest, while any quickening of heartbeat was captured by a sphygmograph attached to the child's left arm. The right hand of the viewing chair was fitted with a finger-tapping device to record disruptions in motor control.⁴²

Reflecting the preeminence that reflexology enjoyed during the 1920s, many studies on the effects of film and theater conducted during this decade displayed a bias towards physiological explanations. In his plans to measure the "physical contagiousness" of different film stimuli at the Moscow Polytechnic Museum's "laboratory for the study of mass behavior and mass psychotechnics," Sergei Eisenstein sought to put William James's and Jean D'Udine's physiological accounts of emotional and aesthetic response into practice by enlisting reflexologists to study viewers' facial expressions.⁴³ Making clear the hold of Ivan Pavlov's and Vladimir Bekhterev's ideas over spectator research, the commissions for the study of the viewer at *Glavpolitprosvet* and *Gubpolitprosvet* (the Provincial Department of Political Enlightenment) similarly conceived audience response in terms of conditioned and unconditioned reflexes, associative and sensory reactions, cerebral and subcortical processes.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the question of film and theater's psychological impact was never abandoned completely. At TIuZ and the Institute for the Methods of Extracurricular Educational Activity (IMVR), researchers sought to develop ways of grasping a fuller understanding of the spectator's thoughts and feelings. Registering viewers' verbal responses rather than physical reactions, the film screening observations held by the IMVR prioritized uncovering patterns of mental interpretation and cognition.⁴⁵ Both institutes also looked to children's drawings, letters, and compositions to glean information about the "trace" left by the screening or performance on the viewer's psyche.⁴⁶

Whether psychological or physiological in inflection, however, all such studies sought to establish a precise link between theatrical and cinematic "causes" and spectatorial "effects." If research on audience typology had sought to ascertain the sociological or psycho-physiological reasons why a particular type of viewer perceived a production in a specific way, this branch

41. RGALI, f. 970, op. 1, d. 112, l. 33 (Otchet laboratorii po izucheniiu zrelishcha RTO).

42. A. M. Gel'mont, "Izuchenie vliania kino na detei (problema i metody)," *Kul'tura i kino*, no. 4 (1929): 43–44.

43. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 1, d. 2405, l. 22 (Spravka, vydannaia Laboratorii po izucheniiu mass).

44. TsGA Moskvyy (Central State Archive of the City of Moscow), f. 2007, op. 3, d. 2a, l. 40 (Protokoly zasedanii pri Gubpolitprosvete); RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 217.

45. RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, ll. 260–64.

46. Bakhtin, "Pedagogicheskaya rabota," 114–115; "Nauchnoe issledovanie spektaklia," 1; N. I. Zhinkin, "Izuchenie detskogo otnosheniia k kinematograficheskoi kartine," *Pedologiya*, no. 4 (1930): 505–18.

of research concentrated on identifying the attributes of the spectacle that spurred a specific response in the observer. Studies on the effects of cinematic and theatrical productions definitively shifted the seat of audience reactions from the viewer to the stimulus. It was not the audience that was subject to scrupulous dissection in this body of research but the spectacle.

In order to attribute each audience reaction to a given stimulus, investigators would break down plays and films into sequences and shot units before conducting their observations.⁴⁷ Theater researchers were known to time the duration of every performed scene, to note the action occurring on stage at 30-second or minute intervals (in a “*khronometrazh*”), as well as to monitor actors’ performances.⁴⁸ Organizations like the State Institute of the History of Art in Leningrad attempted to isolate the effects upon audiences of different theatrical variables by introducing specific alterations to a performance.⁴⁹ Film researchers were similarly focused on establishing “iron rules of cause-and-effect.”⁵⁰ The plans for a Scientific Research Institute in Cinema and Photography, approved by the state in December 1928, included costings for a laboratory where the impact of aspects of film art such as lighting, framing, and editing on the viewer’s physiology, levels of mental concentration, emotional excitement, and comprehension could be rigorously tested.⁵¹ In the same year, Eisenstein, in his capacity as the head of the film section at the Moscow Polytechnic Museum, also drew up plans to experimentally test the psycho-physiological effects of contrasting sound techniques, editing tempos, and types of montage (particularly motivated and abstract editing), as well as different levels of “eroticism” pertaining to film images.⁵² The filmmaker’s goal of joining audience reactions to set cinematic “causes” was exemplified in his proposal to film the face of the spectator in close-up and to subsequently project this “response” footage side by side with the “film-stimulus.”⁵³

At research organizations such as the IMVR, this type of experimental investigation went far beyond the planning stages.⁵⁴ The institute practiced testing different edits of films on select groups of viewers as a means to isolate the causes of spectators’ emotional engagement or boredom and their atten-

47. The Theater Research Workshop’s graph of audience responses to a spring 1926 production of *The Storm* (*Shtorm*) divided the play into 415 segments. See RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 312, l. 265.

48. V. F. Fedorov, “Opyty izucheniia zritel’nogo zala,” *Zhizn’ iskusstvo*, no. 23 (1925): 11.

49. A. Gvozdev, “Zritel’ i ego issledovateli,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 22 (1925): 6.

50. Nesbet, *Savage Junctions*, 52.

51. RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 22–36. On the resolution to found the institute, see GARF (The State Archive of the Russian Federation) (GARF), f. R7816, op. 1, d. 2 (Protokol no. 287).

52. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 1, d. 2405, l. 1; ll. 21–22.

53. *Ibid.*, ll. 21–22.

54. RAO (The Archive of the Russian Academy of Education), f. 5, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 92, 113 (Materialy direktzii instituta, 1924–1930); RAO, f. 5, op. 1, d. 11, ll. 32–34 (Plany raboty instituta, 1929–1930); RAO, f. 5, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 124–27, 306–7 (Otchetnye materialy instituta, 1927–1931).

tiveness or miscomprehension.⁵⁵ The eminent Soviet director, Mikhail Romm, began his career in cinema by conducting such experiments. Taking up a post at the IMVR's cinema commission in 1926, Romm spent four years testing different cinematic variants on child audiences to determine the effectiveness of different narrative forms and stylistic devices.⁵⁶

The tying of specific audience effects to specific cinematic and theatrical properties promised to enable cultural producers to take charge of the reception process. As Ana Olenina has shown, studies of psycho-physiological effects were underwritten by the vision of a spectator whose mind and body could be brought into harmonious coordination with the spectacle.⁵⁷ Promising the attainment of an “as comprehensive as possible understanding of the method of film-stimuli construction,” cause-and-effect mapping was envisaged as a path to a cinema of “maximal audience impact.”⁵⁸

Both research strands identified in this article sought to use scientific principles to make audience response knowable and thereby manageable. Each research strand, however, was underwritten by a distinct conception of its object of investigation. While the first branch of research sought to study the *social audience*, or “people who can be surveyed, counted, and categorized according to age, sex, and socio-economic status,” the second branch of research fixed its attention on the *spectator*—the subject determined by the properties of the text.⁵⁹ As well as holding contrasting understandings of the viewer, these two research strands were distinguished by different institutional aims. If audience research aimed to help cultural institutions target products to the “right” groups of viewers, investigations into spectatorship sought to help cultural producers craft films and plays that elicited the “right” response.

It would be misleading to claim, as some contemporary critics were wont to do, that studies of a film's impact were completely divorced from the question of viewer particularities.⁶⁰ Cases of overlap between these two research strands were plentiful, not least since many research organizations carried out both types of investigation simultaneously. Nevertheless, two distinct research paths—one targeted at identifying the particularities of specific audience groups, and the other interested in determining a film's effects—remained clearly identifiable. The pre-formed individual addressed by the first strand of research stood apart from the malleable subject postulated by the second. This divergence in approach to the “viewer question” was largely eradicated by the end of the cultural revolution.

55. N. I. Zhinkin, “K voprosu o metodike postroeniia uchebnoi fil'ny,” in *Detskoe kino: Sbornik 1* (Moscow, 1930), 16.

56. Romm's audience observations were used to produce rigorous analyses of individual “film-stimuli,” including a 200-page study of the formal construction of King Vidor's 1928 film, *The Patsy*. See RAO, f. 5, op. 1, d. 24, ll. 196–200ob (Lichnye dela). On Romm's recollections of working at the IMVR, see his *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v 3-kh tomakh*, tom. 2 (Moscow, 1981), 105–7.

57. Olenina, “Psychomotor Aesthetics,” 226.

58. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 1, d. 2405, ll. 24–25.

59. Annette Kuhn, “Women's Genres,” *Screen* 25, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 1984): 23. Susan Ohmer explores this distinction in *George Gallup*, 5.

60. Zagorskii, “Eshche ob izuchenii zritel'ia.”

The Cultural Revolution: From Audience Research to Studies of Spectatorship

The cultural and social transformations inaugurated at the end of the 1920s gradually pushed Soviet researchers to abort the study of the audience for the study of spectatorship. The abandonment of the New Economic Policy and more militant attempts to bring the cultural sphere into line with the aims of cultural reconstruction decreased the value of audience surveys. As NEP and its gradualist approach to “building socialism” gave way to breakneck industrialization and forced collectivization, Soviet culture was expected to demonstrate a “decisive reorientation towards ideological commitment and the accomplishment of party-appointed tasks.”⁶¹ Henceforth, it became more pressing to determine whether a film or performance had successfully communicated its ideological message than whether it had satisfied audience expectations. Although the late 1920s did see a variety of enquiries into the distinct needs, demands, and capabilities of different types of audiences, research that presented viewer psychology and behavior as fixed and immutable sat ill at ease with militant calls for the transformation of the natural world and human “remaking.” The cultural revolution not only demanded the restructuring of Soviet theater and cinema, but also the production of a new type of “mindful and discerning viewer.”⁶² Critics had begun to stress that Soviet cultural producers needed not merely to accommodate audience demand but to transform existing patterns of audience behavior.⁶³

The priority placed on the cultivation of new modes of film and theater spectatorship during the cultural revolution was demonstrated by the vast expansion of “cultural enlightenment work” at the end of the 1920s. Holding that inaccessibility (*nedokhodchivost'*) was the root cause of “passive” viewing habits, cultural enlightenment sought to ensure that no viewer left a film or play without having understood its central message.⁶⁴ Different forms of “work with the viewer” before, during, and after the film screening or theater performance were initiated as measures to eliminate barriers to comprehension and ensure the viewer’s correct interpretation.

Methods of theater enlightenment included the organization of group cultural excursions guided by a teacher or cultural enlightenment worker (the *kul' trabotnik*), who would introduce and explain the play to the collective and lead post-performance discussions.⁶⁵ Similarly, a variety of film organizations

61. “Itogi stroitel'stva kino v SSSR i zadachi sovetsoi kinematografii,” *Puti kino: Pervoe vsesoiuznoe partiinoe soveshchanie po kinematografii*, ed. Boris S. Ol'khovskii (Moscow, 1929), 436.

62. G. Lenobl', “Zritel' i kinoiskusstvo,” *Kino i kul'tura*, no. 11–12 (1930): 28.

63. *Ibid.*, 20.

64. Konstantin L. Gavriushin, *Rabota s fil'moi v derevne: Kinopolitprosvetrabota v derevne* (Moscow, 1930), 36. See also: Efim I. Zusman and Vasilii Pigarev, *OZPKF: Opyt prakticheskoi raboty iacheiki Obshchestva za proletarskoe kino i foto pri kinoteatre “Taganskii” v Moskve* (Moscow, 1931), 44; Lazar' Sukharebskii, *Kino-disput* (Moscow, 1932); R. Kokotova, “Pedolo-pedagogicheskaiia rabota v TIUZe,” in N. Verkhovskii ed., *Teatr iunykh zritelei: Na putiakh tvorcheskoi perestroiki, 1922–1932* (Leningrad, 1932), 67–74.

65. Kokotova, “Pedolo-pedagogicheskaiia rabota”; Vl. Filippov, “Teatral'nye ekskursii, kak metod izucheniia zritel'ia,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1926): 55–57.

stepped up their efforts to educate viewers and eradicate “cinematic illiteracy.”⁶⁶ Whether delivering introductory remarks before the screening, setting up visual displays in the cinema foyer, or circulating accompanying literature and flyers, the film enlightenment worker strove to maximize the audience’s receptiveness to the ideas put forward by the film.⁶⁷

In addition to driving home the message of a given production, preparatory cultural enlightenment work was to pique viewers’ interest and facilitate their emotional engagement in the narrative.⁶⁸ Particularly in screenings directed at peasant audiences, cultural enlightenment work extended into the film showing itself. The *kul’trabotnik* was called upon to read subtitles aloud, underscore significant moments, and explain any perplexing content and visual devices.⁶⁹ Discussions, “film trials,” and “film disputes” were held after the screening in order to strengthen the film’s effect on the viewer and address any inadequacies in comprehension.⁷⁰

The campaign for film and theater enlightenment that gathered pace during the cultural revolution epitomized the growing pressure on cultural producers to better command the reception process. This obligation saw film and theater research undergo significant revision in the 1930s. The cultural revolution’s impact on research agendas can be gleaned from the work of L. M. Skorodumov, a psychologist who worked on the viewer question at NIKFI—the new Research Institute on Cinema and Photography where viewer research relocated to after institutions like the IMShR, the IMVR, and the State Academy of the Artistic Sciences (GAKhN), closed down at the end of the 1920s. In articles published in 1931 and 1932, Skorodumov articulated the new tasks facing film researchers. Criticizing studies that held viewer response to be independent of the designs of the director, Skorodumov called film research to enter a “new phase” targeted at determining how well a filmmaking collective had accomplished its objectives.⁷¹

Stressing the need for spectator investigations to exert a visible impact on the Soviet film industry, Skorodumov’s call for a shift to “effectiveness monitoring” reflected the growing subordination of film and theater research to the practical aims of cultural reconstruction.⁷² Investigators were now expected to participate in making Soviet film and theater more ideologically efficacious and aiding the creation of a new type of spectator. Soviet film researchers, Eisenstein emphasized in 1928, could never be “disinterested” scientific observers for they bore the political task of helping to transform ideological directives into optimally effective chains of “film-stimuli.”⁷³ The late 1920s

66. On efforts to “liquidate cinematic illiteracy” see Gavriushin, *Rabota s fil’ moi*, 5.

67. Zusman and Pigarev, *OZPKF*, 44–46; Mikhail A. Bykov, *Politprosvetrabota vokrug kino-fil’ma* (Moscow, 1934); Gavriushin, *Rabota s fil’ moi*, 13–14.

68. A. Landau, L. Nikolaeva and N. Piatnitskaia, *Vneshkol’naia kino-rabota s det’mi i podrostkami* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1931), 10–16.

69. Bykov, *Politprosvetrabota*, 14–15; Gavriushin, *Rabota s fil’ moi*, 21–22.

70. L. Sukharebskii, *Kino-sud: opyt metod. razrabotki* (Moscow, 1933).

71. L. Skorodumov, “Zritel’ i kino,” *Proletarskoe kino*, no. 19 (1932): 49; L. Skorodumov, “Issledovatel’skaia rabota so zritel’skim kinoaktivom,” *Proletarskoe kino*, no. 9 (1931): 42–47.

72. Skorodumov, “Zritel’ i kino,” 49.

73. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 1, d. 2405, l. 24.

saw the emergence of new, practically-minded research centers, such as the “laboratory for the study of mass psychology” at RTO, whose express purpose was to scrutinize the emotional effectiveness and educational significance of new productions.⁷⁴

The politicization of research practices during this period frequently pushed against the principle of detached observation. At a number of organizations where research into spectatorship was conducted alongside cultural enlightenment work, techniques of viewer observation and methods of *kul'trabota* were treated almost interchangeably.⁷⁵ The blurring of the distinction between investigation and instruction was particularly pronounced in Skorodumov's initiatives at NIKFI. In his 1932 draft of a radio broadcast, the researcher invited viewers to send in their observations on recent films at the same time as attempting to educate cinemagoers on the modes of viewing expected from Soviet citizens. “Watching a film properly means watching it actively,” Skorodumov instructed.⁷⁶ Demonstrating how closely the investigation of the viewer became tied to the cultivation of a particular mode of spectatorship, Skorodumov's guidelines encouraged the viewer's identification with the film's protagonists and full emotional investment in the narrative.

The priority placed on cultivating specific patterns of response over tailoring films and plays to specific “taste publics” gave new impetus to research on the spectator-text relationship. By the beginning of the 1930s, researchers were being discouraged from studying the recipient in isolation from the cultural product.⁷⁷ Even research centers like the “laboratory for the study of mass behavior,” which had previously taken a keen interest in the typology of the viewer, turned their attention to the study of “on-stage stimuli.” The RTO research cell began to compile detailed psycho-physiological profiles of stage actors using tests and questionnaires, even changing its name to “the laboratory for the study of spectacle” in 1932.⁷⁸ The “scientific organization and rational reconstruction” of Soviet theater, the laboratory insisted, would only be achieved through “an understanding of a theatrical production's factors of effectiveness.”⁷⁹ The need for spectator research to pay due attention to the components of the cultural text was also increasingly insisted upon by producers. In a 1929 meeting with the Society of the Friends of Soviet Cinema on the direction of viewer research, director Abram Room underlined the Soviet film industry's urgent need for comprehensive explorations of how particular aspects of cinematic form and style were received by spectators.⁸⁰ Film

74. RGALI, f. 970, op. 4, d. 179, l. 1 (Materialy laboratorii); RGALI, f. 970, op. 4, d. 177, l. 18 (Protokoly zasedanii laboratorii).

75. In a 1931 report on its activities, the Society for Proletarian Photography and Cinema (formerly ODSK) saw no conflict in soliciting audience responses for display on a “Board of Reviews” in confluence with launching a competition to reward the “correct” answers. See Zusman and Pigarev, *OZPKF*, 48–49.

76. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 233, ll. 57–58 (Nauchno-issledovatel'skaia rabota L. M. Skorodumova, vol. 2).

77. Skorodumov, “Zritel' i kino,” 50.

78. RGALI, f. 970, op. 4, d. 179; RGALI, f. 970, op. 1, d. 112, l. 20.

79. RGALI, f. 970, op. 4, d. 179, l. 1

80. ARAN (The Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences), f. 358, op. 1, d. 38, l. 2 (Protokol sovместnogo soveshchaniia).

researchers, Room asserted, were required to help directors eradicate the frequent discrepancy between viewers' comprehension of a film and the director's intentions by finding the "language" that was "most easily understood by the film viewer."⁸¹ With reference to the research activities of the Higher State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), I will now look closer at the studies of spectatorship that superseded research on audience typology in the 1930s.

The New Phase of Spectatorship Research: The "Scientific Research Sector" at the Higher State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK)

Taking over the work that had begun at NIKFI, the Higher State Institute of Cinematography became the site of extensive psychological research on film spectatorship in the early 1930s.⁸² VGIK's "Scientific Research Sector," where a subdivision dedicated to "the study of film perception" opened in 1935, became the chief site of these investigations.⁸³ The lead film psychologists at VGIK—Petr Antonovich Rudik, Ol'ga Ivanovna Nikiforova, and Nikolai Ivanovich Zhinkin—had all studied under Georgii Chelpanov at Moscow University.⁸⁴ A former student of the "father of experimental psychology," Wilhelm Wundt, Chelpanov had played a major role in re-orientating psychological research in Russia towards experimental techniques and laboratory methods. His hostility to materialistic explanations of psychological processes, however, as well as his skepticism towards the application of psychology to practical problems, had led to his being discredited in 1923 as an "idealist."⁸⁵ Following the research trends of the period, Rudik, Nikiforova, and Zhinkin established themselves in the key fields of applied psychology in the 1920s—education (pedology), labor management (psychotechnics), and physical culture.⁸⁶ All three simultaneously pursued research in the field of aesthetics. Rudik and Nikiforova joined the Psycho-Physical Laboratory at GAKhN where they conducted experimental studies of aesthetic perception.⁸⁷ Zhinkin, in turn,

81. *Ibid.*

82. "Nauchno-issledovatel'skaia rabota v 1934g," *Uchebnoe kino*, no. 6 (1934): 1; M. P. Vlasov, ed., *K istorii VGIKa: Chast' I* (Moscow, 2000), 189.

83. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 147, l. 9 (Otchet, 1935).

84. RAO, f. 5, op. 1, d. 8, ll. 36, 41 (Spiski nauchnykh sotrudnikov); RGALI, f. 941, op. 10, d. 533 (Lichnoe delo); Nikolai I. Zhinkin, "Avtobiograficheskie spravki," in Sergei I. Gidlin, ed., *Iazyk—Rech'—Tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1998), 342–52.

85. For a more detailed overview, see Alex Kozulin, *Psychology in Utopia: Towards a Social History of Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 8–14; David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Oxford, 1989), 107–12; Mikhail G. Iaroshevskii, *Istoriia psikhologii* (Moscow, 1966), 524–25.

86. As well as working at the Central Institute of Physical Culture, Rudik conducted psycho-physiological investigations of "gifted" children and aptitude tests at the Krupskaia Academy of Communist Education. See RGALI, f. 941, op. 10, d. 533, and Petr Antonovich Rudik, *Psikhologicheskii ispytaniia obshchei odarenosti* (Moscow, 1927). Nikiforova worked at the Central Pedological Laboratory and the psychotechnics laboratory of MKKh (the Moscow "Communal Economy" directorate), see RAO, f. 5, op. 1, l. 41. Zhinkin worked at the pedagogical research institutes, the IMShR and IMVR, see RAO, f. 5, op. 1, l. 36.

87. RGALI, f. 941, op. 12, d. 57, ll. 35–36 (Otchet, 1925–26); The Psycho-Physical Laboratory was headed by Vladimir Ekzemplierskii—a specialist in differential psychology and former colleague of Chelpanov's.

joined GAKhN's Philosophical Section to research the question of aesthetic form.⁸⁸ As well as working together at GAKhN, all three researchers had ties to the IMVR, the institute where Zhinkin had led experimental work into film composition.⁸⁹ Rudik, who had previously headed the cinema laboratory at the Moscow Institute of Experimental Psychology, was also a well-established figure in psycho-physiological film research.⁹⁰ The Scientific Research Sector did not survive the ideological clampdown in Soviet psychology that followed the 1936 decree against "pedological distortions," being abolished in February 1937.⁹¹ Although Zhinkin and Nikiforova proceeded to work on the psychology of art and aesthetic perception at the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in the late Stalin period, none of the scholars returned to the problem of film spectatorship.⁹²

It is notable that Nikiforova, Rudik, and Zhinkin emphatically framed their work at VGIK as the exploration of a psychological rather than physiological problem—understood as "film perception," or *kinovospriiatie*.⁹³ Their aim to investigate a film's effects upon the viewer's thought process, imagination, and emotion rather than upon the viewer's physiology was in keeping with the growing recognition in the 1930s of the mental realm's independence from the body. From the late 1920s, Soviet psychology had begun to devote increasing attention to the "higher psychological functions."⁹⁴ This trend continued into the 1930s, with leading Stalin-era psychologists like Sergei Rubinshtein, Aleksei Leont'ev, and Boris Teplov focusing on the study of cognitive processes such as perception, memory, emotion, and will.⁹⁵

The shift away from quantitative and physiological approaches in film-viewer research was demonstrated by Skorodumov's early 1930s calls for probings into audience reflexes and reactions to be supplanted by the investigation of a film's impact on "consciousness."⁹⁶ The measurement of "reaction times,

88. RGALI, f. 941, op. 1, d. 104, ll. 25, 29 (Otchet: Filosofskoe otdelenie).

89. Zhinkin and Nikiforova joined the IMVR in 1924 and 1930, respectively, see RAO, f. 5, op. 1, d. 8, ll. 36, 41. Rudik, while not formally employed by the IMVR, delivered a number of presentations at the institute as a member of its "Section for the Study of the Environment," see RAO, f. 5, op. 1, d. 3, l. 31 (Materialy, 1924–1930).

90. Rudik represented the institute at the 1929 meeting between audience researchers and film producers, see ARAN, f. 358, op. 1, d. 38.

91. M. P. Vlasov, ed., *K istorii VGIKa: Chast' II* (Moscow, 2013), 8. On the Central Committee decree "on Pedological Perversions in the System of the People's Commissariat of Education," see Raymond A. Bauer, *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 123–24. For an analysis of the decree's effect on the science of reception, see Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader*, 227–28.

92. RAO, f. 82, op. 3, l. 60; TsGA Moskv, f. 1-52, op. 1, d. 195, l. 1 (Otchet o rabote N. I. Zhinkina).

93. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 230 (P. A. Rudik, "Psikhologicheskie osobennosti"); RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214 (O. I. Nikiforova, "Problema kino-vospriiatii"); RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 193 (N. Zhinkin and S. P. Vinogradov, "Issledovanie effektivnosti").

94. See, for example, L.S. Vygotsky, "Problema kul'turnogo razvitiia rebenka," *Pedologiia*, no. 1 (1928): 58–77.

95. B. M. Teplov and Sergei V. Kravkov, eds., *Zritel'nye oshchushcheniia i vospriiatii* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1935); Aleksei N. Leont'ev and L.S. Vygotsky, *Razvitie pamiatii: eksperimental'noe issledovanie vysshikh psikhologicheskikh funktsii* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1931).

96. Skorodumov, "Issledovatel'skaia rabota," 42.

heart rate, and blood pressure,” the psychologist warned, was of no use in determining whether the viewer had watched a film actively and had left with the right ideological conclusions.⁹⁷ Alongside denouncing the observation of mass reactions widely practiced in the 1920s as a form of “behaviorism” and “Enchmenism,” Skorodumov scolded statistical investigations for their “blind pursuit of numbers” and their reduction of qualitative experiences to quantities; the *anketa*’s standardized questions and pre-given answers, he claimed, had treated viewers as “mechanical sorting machines” rather than conscious individuals.⁹⁸ Skorodumov’s call for film research to shift its focus was echoed by the theater research centers of the period, which similarly rallied against the “fetishization” of graphs and charts and directed investigators towards “qualitative questions.”⁹⁹

The VGIK scholars explicitly set their methodology against the deference to physiological explanations and large data sets prevalent in strands of 1920s film research. Mass observations and mass surveys were deployed by these researchers only in combination with methods targeted at unravelling a film’s psychological impact. In a 1936 study, Nikiforova went as far as to reject the mass *anketa* wholesale, asserting that it produced “nothing but the most superficial data on audience behavior.”¹⁰⁰ The investigations she conducted both independently and in collaboration with Rudik prioritized the observation of small groups of pre-selected spectators who were instructed to express their thoughts and feelings aloud.¹⁰¹ To uncover a film’s impact on a viewer’s thought process, emotion, and imagination (referred to by Nikiforova as the second and third stages of a film’s “psychic life”), the psychologists also interviewed their test subjects individually after the screening.¹⁰² Zhinkin’s studies of educational films similarly called on a combination of qualitative methods to capture the multidimensionality of a film’s psychological impact. Alongside investigating levels of comprehension through written tests and individual and group discussions, Zhinkin used viewers’ compositions—a method he developed at the IMVR in the 1920s—to determine which aspects of the film had been remembered most vividly.¹⁰³

Just as the investigators who sought to attribute modes of response to particular aspects of a film’s form or content in the 1920s, the VGIK psychologists placed great emphasis on the study of the individual film text. The object of their investigation was not the viewer per se, they insisted, but the viewer and film hybrid (*fil'm-zritel'*) produced during the process of spectatorship.¹⁰⁴ Before venturing to study spectatorial response, Rudik’s

97. Ibid.

98. “Skorodumov, “Zritel’ i kino,” 53–55. Emmanuel Enchman was a behaviorist whose “theory of the new biology” was influential in the early 1920s.

99. A. Avdeev, “Opyt izucheniia spektaklia dlia detei,” in Adrian I. Piotrovskii, ed., *Teatr i unykh zritelei*, 84.

100. RGALI, f. 2900, op.1 d. 214, l. 9.

101. Ibid., ll. 10–11.

102. Ibid., ll. 13–15. Transcripts of some of the interviews conducted by Rudik and Nikiforova for the film *Counterplan* are preserved at RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 975.

103. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 193, ll. 24–25, 31–51.

104. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, l. 65.

research collective would produce a comprehensive, “objective” analysis of a film’s stylistic properties, story content, and formal construction. The interrelation between the different narrative lines of a film would be mapped and the readability (*obozrимость*) of each shot calculated based on the number, size, and clarity of objects occupying the field of vision.¹⁰⁵ The proportion of synthetic shots (in which a narrative element was depicted in the course of a single take) to analytical shots (in which the story content was fragmented into discrete units) would also be diligently recorded.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, in addition to the familiar “cardiograph” of audience response, Rudik’s investigations would produce plot line diagrams, graphs depicting the fluctuation of *obozrимость* across episodes and bar charts showcasing analytical to synthetic shot ratios.¹⁰⁷

These filmic dissections aimed to shed light on a question neglected by 1920s investigations into audience typology—the reasons behind audience success or failure. Rudik’s study of Lev Kuleshov’s *The Great Consoler* (*Velikii uteshitel’*, 1933), a film that a staggering 78% of viewers under investigation had failed to interpret correctly, was typical in mapping a correlation between problems in audience understanding and specific properties of the film text.¹⁰⁸ Kuleshov’s film set out to indict art divorced from social obligation through the portrayal of an imprisoned author (O. Henry) who gradually resolves to use his craft to bear witness to the injustices that surround him rather than to “console” his readers. Rudik’s investigation found, however, that this message had eclipsed the vast majority of the viewers studied. Rudik concluded that the main barrier to audience comprehension was not the film’s visual aspect (*The Great Consoler* was found to have a good level of “readability”), but its complex narrative construction. Kuleshov’s interspersed O. Henry’s “coming to consciousness” with multiple subplots featuring the heroic safecracker Jimmy Valentine (a fellow prisoner whose exploits O. Henry embellishes in his fiction) and Dulcie, an avid reader of Henry’s stories, proved to be deeply confusing. Thirty-nine percent of viewers studied took the extended segment “The Metamorphosis of Jimmy Valentine” to be part of the film’s diegesis rather than a parodic story within a story. Rudik also noted that viewers lost sight of the film’s central theme due to becoming engrossed in the subsidiary narrative of Jimmy Valentine, who they considered to be a more worthy hero than the weak-willed O. Henry.¹⁰⁹ In addition to *The Great Consoler*’s narrative complexities and failure to present the chief protagonist in a heroic light, Rudik’s investigation singled out the film’s opaque title, stylized costumes,

105. Since analytical shots demanded a level of creative activity from the viewer, the proportion of analytic to synthetic shots in a film was taken as an indicator of a film’s level of difficulty.

106. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 231, ll. 9–16; 28–39 (P. A. Rudik and O. I. Nikiforova, “Opyt izucheniia vospriiatiiia”); RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 231, ll. 16–18.

107. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 231, l. 38; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 231, l. 15.

108. E. K-va, “Problemy izucheniia zritelia: Na doklade v Dome Kino,” *Sovetskoe kino*, 7 (1934): 77–78.

109. *Ibid.*, 77.

and structural disjointedness as factors that negatively affected its accessibility, and concurrently, its performance at the box office.¹¹⁰

Nikiforova's work, which was conducted in consultation with Boris Teplov, probed even deeper into the "viewer-film" synthesis. After completing a series of studies as part of Rudik's research team, the psychologist led an independent enquiry into the narrative construction of Stalin-era cinema, writing her 1936 candidate's thesis on the topic. Nikiforova was particularly interested in unpacking the impact of narrative exposition techniques on the reception process. Examining viewer responses to Fridrikh Ermler's and Sergei Iutkevich's 1932 film *Counterplan (Vstrechnyi)*—a production drama set in Leningrad during the years of the First Five-Year Plan that stages the battle of an aging factory worker (Semen Ivanovich Babchenko) against alcohol addiction—Nikiforova's study revealed that the vast majority of viewers initially assumed they were watching a romantic drama rather than a film about "reeducation" and the struggle for a counterplan.¹¹¹

Nikiforova attributed the viewer's expectation of a romantic love-triangle plot to the opening's failure to set the film's hero (Babchenko) apart from the other characters, and to clearly indicate the film's central narrative thread. As Nikiforova pointed out, the opening of *Counterplan* fixes audience attention on the domestic *byt* (everyday life) of a young couple, Pasha and Katia—both workers at the local factory. The pair's playful exchanges are interrupted by the return of their friend Vasia (the factory committee secretary) from an assignment in Moscow. With only a cursory mention that the purpose of Vasia's trip was to affirm the counterplan, the scene cuts to the Babchenko residence. Sitting across from his wife at the breakfast table, Semen Ivanovich downs his customary glass of vodka as the factory whistle blows, his greedy consumption of the substance conveyed in lingering close-up. Only in a subsequent scene depicting Pasha and Vasia's discussion of recent developments at the factory is it made clear that Babchenko is an accomplished worker who requires the guidance of the collective to get back on track. Nikiforova's analysis of the audience impact of the film's narrative presentation revealed that the opening fixation on the relationship between Katia, Pasha, and Vasia led many spectators to view Babchenko as a secondary character. Many viewers assumed, for example, that he was Katia's father. More importantly, Nikiforova found that a high proportion of viewers actually mistook Babchenko for a saboteur (*vreditel'*) who sought to hijack the completion of the counterplan. In addition, Pasha was also commonly mistaken for an antagonist alongside Babchenko.¹¹²

Mapping misconceptions of narrative dynamics onto the particularities of the film's exposition, Nikiforova concluded that the indications of Babchenko's role as a "positive protagonist" had been overridden by the film's emphasis on his drinking. The revelation of Babchenko's alcoholism in his very first on-screen appearance, Nikiforova noted, invited viewers

110. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, ll. 77–81 (Stenogramma zasedaniia).

111. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, ll. 81–83.

112. *Ibid.*, ll. 78–86.

to associate Babchenko exclusively with “unSovietness.”¹¹³ To be sure, Nikiforova acknowledged that the false impressions created by the opening did not tend to be lasting. The use of close-ups and emotionally charged dialogue to relate narrative information in later scenes ensured that the majority of viewers corrected their false impressions and progressed to what Nikiforova conceptualized as the “second stage” of the film experience—the moment of “full entry” into the film when the viewer comprehended the film’s narrative dynamics and became emotionally engrossed in the action.¹¹⁴ The psychologist confirmed her thesis that viewers’ confusion over character motivation and narrative dynamics was caused by deficiencies in the film’s preliminary exposition via an experiment that harked back to the research conducted at the IMVR in the 1920s. A re-edited version of *Counterplan* that omitted the first twenty-five shots of the film was shown to a select group of viewers. Nikiforova reported that not a single participant in the experiment had assumed the film to be a romantic drama, or had mistaken Babchenko for a “*vreditel’*.”¹¹⁵

Jettisoning their earlier interest in differential psychology, the VGIK scholars framed their attention to the spectator-text relationship as a corrective to the errors perpetuated by prior investigations into the typology of the Soviet audience. Describing this body of research as a “left deviation,” Nikiforova argued that the investigators who had embarked on “proving” that blue-collar workers were more intellectually capable of understanding films than white-collar workers, or that collective farmers were not receptive to romantic plots, had overlooked how the different components of a film shaped the perception process.¹¹⁶ Response to a film was determined not by the bio-social constitution of the person watching, the VGIK psychologists insisted, but by a film’s thematic content, narrative construction, cinematography and acting.¹¹⁷ While the studies conducted at VGIK were still mindful to include spectators from a variety of social backgrounds, they did so not with the aim of exposing audience stratification but in the hope of identifying the common features of the film-viewing experience and establishing universal laws.¹¹⁸

Breaking down audience responses into 105 different categories, Nikiforova asserted that instances of subjective fantasizing were quite atypical for the film-viewing experience.¹¹⁹ The spectator’s entire thought process, she claimed, was very tightly intertwined with the action on screen. This endowed the director with a great deal of control over the process of reception, making it possible to produce a film that would be received in the same way by different types of viewers.¹²⁰ Rudik similarly dismissed the notion that every viewer interpreted a film in a unique way as “ideological subjectivism.” Why should a film function any differently, he asked, than a party resolution

113. *Ibid.*, l. 86

114. *Ibid.*, 88–89, 92. On Nikiforova’s thesis of “full entry”, see *ibid.*, ll. 57–63.

115. *Ibid.*, ll. 92–93.

116. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 135, l. 110 (*Stenogramma soveshchani*).

117. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, ll. 77–78.

118. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 135, l. 15; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, ll. 128–29; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 231, l. 42.

119. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, l. 39.

120. *Ibid.*, ll. 134–37.

published in *Pravda* that communicated the same information to all readers unequivocally?¹²¹ Like his colleagues, Rudik claimed that a film could garner a unified response from diverse viewers if it guided and organized the perception process “in the right way.”¹²²

In line with the new objectives set for audience research during the cultural revolution, the VGIK psychologists sought to help directors ensure that their films produced the effects they intended. “Our task,” Rudik explained, “is to determine the means that would allow a filmmaking collective to ensure optimal effectiveness.”¹²³ In fixing their gaze on finding practical solutions to the problems facing the film industry, the VGIK scholars partially backtracked from their earlier studies, which had sought to experimentally test the effects of specific formal and stylistic properties. A comprehension of the psychological particularities of film perception “as such,” Nikiforova contended, presented a more expedient path towards “optimally effective” film production than testing the effects of every cinematic variable.¹²⁴ Just as artists had discovered the rules of perspective, Zhinkin noted, so filmmakers needed to acquire a “generalized knowledge” about the mechanics of film perception.¹²⁵

The scholars’ care to orient their investigations around questions that were of direct relevance to film producers reflected the Scientific Research Sector’s delimitation as a research institution focused on helping to solve the practical issues facing the film industry.¹²⁶ The results of VGIK’s studies of film spectatorship were “keenly awaited” by the Administration for Cinefication (*Upravlenie kinofikatsii pri SNK RSFSR*), which directly sponsored some of Rudik and Nikiforova’s work and sent its representatives to attend the meetings of the “section for the study of film perception.”¹²⁷ Similarly, Zhinkin had been assigned to conduct his research by the trust on educational film (*Souiztekhfil’ m*).¹²⁸ It was not uncommon for VGIK researchers to be involved in Soviet film production first hand; in addition to conducting research and teaching at VGIK, Zhinkin was an editor at *Souiztekhfil’ m*, and the author of a series of educational film screenplays.¹²⁹ The sector’s location within an institute responsible for cultivating the next generation of Soviet filmmakers was also indicative of the effort made to facilitate the translation of its findings into industry practice.¹³⁰ The inclusion of *Mosfil’ m* in the drafting of research plans and the opening of a VGIK research cell at the studio, as well as the dissemination of the sector’s outputs through public lectures and informational bulletins targeted at film industry workers, were some of the further measures

121. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, l. 82–83.

122. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 230, ll. 6, 12–13.

123. RGALI, op. 1, d. 974, l. 13.

124. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 135, ll. 35–37.

125. N. Zhinkin, “Izuchenie zritel’ia i problemy postroeniia uchebnoi fil’my,” *Uchebnoe kino*, no. 6 (1934): 14–25.

126. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 147, l. 26 (Ob organizatsionnoi strukture NIS VGIKa).

127. *Ibid.*, l. 27; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 135, l. 3.

128. “Nauchno-issledovatel’skaia rabota v 1934g,” 1.

129. TsGA Moskvy, f. 1–52, op. 1, l. 1.

130. Zhinkin taught a course on “The Methodology of Constructing an Educational Film” alongside his research work. See Zhinkin, “Avtobiograficheskie spravki,” 342.

taken in 1935 to ensure firm ties between VGIK's research sector and Soviet film production.¹³¹

Chief among the findings that Nikiforova hoped would help to improve Soviet filmmaking practices was her postulation that the film experience was comprised of two parts—a period “before” and “after” the viewer's full emersion into the narrative.¹³² The active character of film perception was another key discovery; the film experience, she asserted, should be understood as a collaborative process in which the viewer pieced together the information provided by the filmmaker into a coherent whole.¹³³ Nikiforova also stressed that film viewing was an emotional as well as an intellectual endeavor. Moreover, she warned that films that demanded a concerted intellectual effort from their viewers left little mental energy available for emotional engagement.¹³⁴ Highlighting the viewer's inability to concentrate on a single object for prolonged periods of time, Rudik urged filmmakers to take into account that some (or even most) of the information directed at the viewer would be overlooked.¹³⁵ In addition, both Rudik and Nikiforova pointed to the viewer's longing for familiarity, unity and coherence. When faced by convoluted narrative dynamics, Nikiforova noted, the viewer tended to simplify them into more digestible and familiar narrative tropes.¹³⁶ Rudik and Zhinkin similarly noted the viewer's striving to “straighten out” convoluted narrative constructions and disjointed editing.¹³⁷

The “psychological laws” of film interpretation brought to light by the VGIK psychologists aimed to provide Soviet directors with the scientific foundations necessary to build a more exacting practice, helping them to appreciate potential barriers to accessibility and to find means of compensating for the inadequacies of human perception. Even while claiming that they did not seek to prescribe “set formulas for success,” all three psychologists outlined specific narrative and stylistic techniques through which the viewer's attention could be better guided, the spectator's mental effort economized, and the process of reading a film made easier. Films with linear plot lines centered on the fate of an individual hero and a leisurely pace of editing were better received, Rudik, Nikiforova, and Zhinkin asserted, than films with disjointed structures, multiple narrative lines, and rapid montage.¹³⁸ An action presented via a series of shots required more mental effort to interpret, Rudik and Nikiforova noted, than an action captured in a single take. Both psychologists also pointed to the importance of preliminary exposition, clear indication of the time and place of action, uncluttered shot composition, and the

131. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 147, ll. 4–5ob, 37, 13ob; M. P. Vlasov, ed., *K istorii VGIKa: Chast' II*, 6.

132. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, ll. 46–68.

133. *Ibid.*, ll. 65–66.

134. *Ibid.*, l. 44.

135. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 230, ll. 9–11; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, ll. 9–11.

136. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, ll. 106–108.

137. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 193, l. 174; E. K-va, “Problemy izucheniia zritel'ia,” 78.

138. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 135; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 231; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, ll. 14–16; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 193, ll. 155, 224–227; N. Zhinkin, “Elementy s'uzhetnosti v uchebnoe fil'me,” *Uchebnoe kino*, no. 1 (1936): 7–20.

use of close-ups and lighting to highlight narratively-significant characters and objects. Narrative economy, a title accurately reflecting the film's central plot dynamics and restraint in the use of abstraction and symbolism were also encouraged.¹³⁹

The close coincidence between the type of film narrative and style that the VGIK psychologists found to be best suited to the viewer's understanding and the characteristic features of socialist realist cinema raises questions concerning the ideological pressures placed on the Scientific Research Sector. To be sure, disapproving discussions of experimental cinema's "inaccessibility" had become a mainstay of the Soviet film press from the late 1920s.¹⁴⁰ Upon its foundation in 1933, the Scientific Research Sector promised to tackle the lack of a "strong narrative backbone" in recent films produced by the "masters" of Soviet cinema.¹⁴¹ By 1935, the sector was being actively reminded that it was not operating "in the name of pure science" but with the aim of producing findings that would have a direct impact on production.¹⁴² While the pressure to help the Soviet film industry make more "effective" and more comprehensible films certainly weighed heavy on VGIK's film psychologists, it would be problematic to characterize their work as a "distorted" scientific practice.

Although Rudik and Nikiforova's studies pointed to the "errors" of more experimental works like Kuleshov's *The Great Consoler*, they found much canonical Stalin-era filmmaking to be equally wanting. Precisely at the time that films such as *Counterplan*, *Peasants (Krest'iane)*, (Fridrikh Ermler, 1934) and *Flyers (Letchiki)*, (Iulii Raizman, 1935) were held up as great achievements of socialist realist cinema, Nikiforova pointed to their various deficiencies in ensuring audience comprehension. The methods that the psychologists deployed in their 1930s studies, as well as the conclusions they reached, were also largely consistent with the investigations they had conducted years earlier. Zhinkin had first begun to affirm the importance of continuity editing and "siuzhetnost'," for example, at the IMVR during the late 1920s.¹⁴³ Moreover, if the film techniques advocated by the three scholars (including preliminary exposition and continuity editing) became characteristic features of the mass-oriented cinema promoted under Stalin, they were also hallmarks of the system of narrative and aesthetic conventions that would become known as the "classical" film style. Echoing the claims of the VGIK film psychologists, the US film theorists who later applied the principles of cognitive psychology to the analysis of film, including David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, also conceptualized the cinema of narrative continuity as the most adept at engaging the viewer's "mental structures and perceptual capacities."¹⁴⁴

139. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 230, l. 14; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, ll. 9–10, 14–16; RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 214, ll. 55–57, 66, 102–3. See also, Zhinkin, "K voprosu o metodike," 16.

140. See, for example, Pavel Petrov-Bytov, "U nas net sovetskogo kinematographa," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 17 (1929), 8.

141. M. P. Vlasov, ed., *K istorii VGIKa: Chast' I*, 191.

142. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 147, l. 25.

143. Zhinkin, "Izuchenie detskogo otnosheniia;" Zhinkin, "K voprosu o metodike."

144. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 66. As Hansen notes, in

As Miriam Hansen notes, despite its conventional designation as “classical,” the system of aesthetic and narrative codes established in Hollywood and beyond in the late 1920s is best understood as an attempt to establish a cinema commensurate with twentieth-century modernity’s demand for efficiency, rationalization, and mass production.¹⁴⁵ While the VGIK psychologists’ battle against inaccessibility was grounded in ideological objectives that were specific to Stalinism, it was also the product of a transnational search for a cinematic language (or “global sensory vernacular,” to borrow Hansen’s phrase) that could most efficiently manage the viewer’s activity and ensure optimal intelligibility.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, the VGIK psychologists perceived their quest for a cinema of maximal effectiveness as a project that transcended the aims of Stalin-era culture. Rudik framed Soviet film production’s employment of spectator research as a vital means of bringing the industry up to speed with the standard practices of US and west European “film factories.”¹⁴⁷ Placing Soviet spectator research on par with initiatives undertaken abroad, the psychologist claimed to have personally discussed his objective of finding the means to effortlessly guide the spectator through the narrative with the great German expressionist filmmaker, Fritz Lang.¹⁴⁸

In contrast to the battle to optimize cinema’s effectiveness waged during the “Great Break,” which had been wedded to the campaign to cultivate the Soviet audience and bring it “up” to the level of the film, the research conducted by the Scientific Research Sector sought to adjust Soviet film production to the viewer’s mode of perception. VGIK scholars no longer looked to extra-cinematic means of optimizing the perceptual process, concentrating their attention on making the film itself more “readerly.”¹⁴⁹ Largely sidestepping the question of whether the viewer’s perception could be “reforged,” Rudik, Nikiforova, and Zhinkin posited that the production of successful films was contingent on directors taking due account of the psychological laws of film interpretation. Each of their studies blamed problems in comprehension on the director’s neglect of a wide variety of psychological givens.¹⁵⁰ The notion that the spectator would understand anything set in front of them was completely mistaken, Rudik professed, “immutable scientific norms” could not just be swept aside.¹⁵¹

their seminal work on the topic, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson portray “classical Hollywood” as a style attuned to the laws of “natural perception.” See their *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York, 1985), 3–4. Noël Carroll has similarly argued that the “phenomenally widespread effectiveness” of films that conform to the “classical” model is based on their being “designed to engage and excite cognitive and perceptual structures.” See his, “The Power of Movies,” *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 101.

145. Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses,” 66–67.

146. *Ibid.*, 72.

147. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, ll. 5–6.

148. *Ibid.*, l.16.

149. As Rudik made clear, the opportunities to shape the viewer’s perception provided by introductory lectures, advertising, and foyer displays paled in comparison with the cinematic means at the director’s disposal. See RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 230, l. 12.

150. *Ibid.*, l. 14.

151. RGALI, f. 2900, op. 1, d. 974, l. 87.

The growing disjunction between the aims of the VGIK scholars and the objectives of Soviet culture during the era of the “socialist offensive” was made clear by the objections that Kuleshov, the “founder” of Soviet montage cinema, raised at a June 1934 debate on the work of Rudik’s collective. Taking the floor to respond to Rudik’s report on the inaccessibility of his film *The Great Consoler*, the veteran director protested: “It wouldn’t be right to only make films that are unequivocally accepted and liked by the public. We have an audience of millions and must make films that would aid its cultivation. We must stay a step ahead of the viewer and lead him/her.”¹⁵² The 1935 book written by the film scholar and founder of the Scientific Research Sector, Nikolai Lebedev, made clear the extent to which Soviet cinema had moved on from the objectives voiced by Kuleshov. *Towards the Question of Cinematic Specificity* reminded Soviet filmmakers that “films which are intended for an audience of millions and tens of millions must be constructed with thought to the average psycho-physiological requirements of the majority of the people comprising these millions.”¹⁵³

The VGIK scholars’ pursuit of a cinema commensurate with the laws of perception was part of the Stalinist film industry’s assault on the wall of “incomprehension” purported to have arisen between film producers and their consumers during the period of the avant-garde’s dominance over Soviet cinema.¹⁵⁴ If the VGIK scholars were participants in the project of bringing art “closer to the masses,” however, they were also successors to the drive to scientifically command spectatorial response that was initiated in the 1920s, as well as respondents to global efforts to establish a mode of representation that could effortlessly guide the viewer’s perception.

152. *Ibid.*, I, 58.

153. Nikolai A. Lebedev, *K voprosu o spetsifike kino* (Moscow, 1935), 101.

154. G. Lenobl’, “Zritel’ i kinoiskusstvo,” 16.